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THE STELE FROM THONIS-HERACLEION



This black granodiorite stele, 1.99 m high, was discovered by the IEASM in the sunken city of Thonis-Heracleion in 2000. It bears a royal decree (380 BC) by Nectanebo I, first pharaoh of the XXXth dynasty, which was promulgated in the temple of Neith at Saïs in favour of that sanctuary.

Under the Saites, the Persians and the last three native dynasties, Thonis-Heracleion was the border and customs station and the emporion where Greek products passed on their way to Greek trading posts in Naukratis.

Royal donation to the temple

With the decree the king decides to raise the subsidies granted the temple, out of the funds flowing into the royal treasury from customs dues exacted at Thonis, and from taxes raised at Naukratis on Greek trade and manufacturing.



In that period, Egypt had emerged with difficulty from over a century of Persian rule and during the short XXVIIIth and XXIXth dynasties the country had progressively recreated its own institutions. In 380 BC, Achoris, last pharaoh of the XXIXth dynasty, died and the victorious general Nectanebo of Sebennytos was proclaimed king, very probably with the support of the Saite priesthood.



Re-establishing Egypt's prestige

The royal donation accorded in the year 1 of his reign is no doubt a political gesture, but it also inaugurates the very considerable activity the king developed in favour of the temples, parallel to his important efforts to re-establish Egypt's prestige. During his reign, the arts and literature find their inspiration in the "renaissance" of the period of the XXVIth Saite dynasty, culminating with this stele, which is a perfect masterpiece.



Stele proofs Thonis and Heracleion name the same town

In the last two of the fourteen columns (from right to the left) of the stele's decree, the king commands: ". . . that this stele be erected at the entrance of the 'sea of the Greeks' in a town whose name is Thonis". It was indeed the discovery in situ of this monument on the area of the temple of Heracleion that revealed the name of the town that had sunk to the bottom of the ocean, i.e. Thonis, and the place where it was set up (the temple of Thonis-Heracleion) provided proof that Thonis and Heracleion were respectively the Egyptian and the Greek name of the same town.

Existence of twin stele

In 1899, an almost identical stele, also intact and situated in an Amun temple, had been unearthed at Naukratis – the Greek trading place in existence from the eighth century BC some 70 km southeast of Heracleion on the same branch of the Nile. There, it

is written in column 13: “that this stele be erected at Naukratis”.

Very rare event in the history of archaeology

In a very rare example two intact copies of the same edict by Nectanebo I were brought to light practically on the spot where they had been originally set up. The archaeological data suggest that the stele of Thonis had already been buried voluntarily at the time of the submersion, placed face down to the soil, and its hieroglyphs carefully coated with clay for protection. It is quite possible that the Naukratis stele, found deeply buried during irrigation works, had also intentionally been hidden in antiquity – which may permit the hope of one day discovering another copy at Saïs in the area of the temple of Neith itself.

Object: Black granodiorite, National Museum of Alexandria (SCA 277)
Source: Original description by Anne-Sophie von Bomhard in exhibition catalogue „Osiris. Egypt‘s Sunken Mysteries“, Paris, 2015, re-ed 2018, exh. Egypt‘s Sunken Cities, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 4 November 2018 - 14 April 2019
Further reading: The decree of Saïs, Anne-Sophie von Bomhard, Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology, 2012
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